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STAT

President Turns To the Senate In Fight for Bill

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WASHINGTON, March 20 — White House officials said today that, with the House rejection of President Reagan's \$100 million aid package for the Nicaraguan rebels, they were placing their hopes on the Senate.

At the same time, they conceded that some serious tactical mistakes had been made in the battle in the House.

Meanwhile, some House Democrats said they had been able to defeat Mr. Reagan's aid proposal because the President had failed to articulate his policy clearly or show a firm enough commitment to seeking a diplomatic settlement.

Resentment of Tactics

In addition, they said, the tactics of some Administration officials who had questioned the loyalty and patriotism of Mr. Reagan's opponents backfired, generating resentment and hardening opposition to the aid package.

Mr. Reagan, in a statement designed to project the Administration as looking ahead immediately after the House vote, vowed to continue efforts to obtain the money. The President said the Administration would now shift its efforts to the Senate, where an intense selling campaign is to begin Friday.

'Real and Effective Assistance'

"Those Democrats and Republicans who stood with the forces of freedom have their nation's profound gratitude, and the President's," Mr. Reagan said. "But they have more. They have the President's solemn determination to come back again and again until this battle is won; until freedom is given the chance that it deserves in Nicaragua."

"Tomorrow we will begin to press in the Senate, and then back again in the House, for the real and effective assistance for Nicaragua's freedom fighters, which was denied them today, and which those brave men and women deserve."

Mr. Reagan termed the House defeat

a "dark day for freedom."

"This vote must be reversed," he said. "The Soviet Union cannot be permitted to enjoy the luxury of knowing that once captured, a country will be relegated forever to the Communist camp. We declare our unwavering support for the freedom and for peace-loving peoples struggling to overcome Communist tyranny."

Several senior White House aides gauging what had gone wrong in the House battle said strategists had made a tactical error by shifting gears in recent days with expressions of a possible compromise.

In particular, they said it was a mistake for Mr. Reagan to agree publicly Wednesday to a compromise that would have allowed some of the \$70 million in military aid to be suspended for 90 days, while attempts were made to get negotiations with Managua started.

'A Fundamental Error'

"It was a fundamental error," a White House official said. "Our original strategy was to get a clear definition of the issue and to then have a vote and not to get things all muddled up."

The official said White House aides had chosen the compromise when it became clear that despite two weeks of intense lobbying by Mr. Reagan, including a nationally broadcast speech Sunday, they were still at least 10 votes short of House passage. In the final tally today, the 10-vote gap remained.

One senior aide said he believed in retrospect that some House members saw the compromise as a ruse in that it would have required Congress to provide the full \$100 million — \$25 million immediately and the remaining \$75 million in 90 days if negotiations proved unsuccessful. Some Administration officials have admitted privately that the full amount could not have been spent immediately even without the agreement, so such a spending delay would have been inevitable.

But in endorsing that approach, the senior aide said, the White House lost the force of the main argument about how critical the funds were for the insurgents — a theme the President has cited repeatedly in public statements and in meetings with more than 34 senators and 60 representatives.

'The Right Side'

"A lot of members were 'right-siders,' meaning that they had become convinced that we were on the right side of the issue," the aide said. "The compromise made it unclear exactly what the right side was."

But another key White House strategist, who asserted that the compromise had not been a factor, traced the defeat to the fact that the Speaker of the House, Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., Democrat of Massachusetts, had promised a second vote on the aid question in April. That maneuver, he said, meant that some legislators could vote against it now but support it later.

House members provided a wide range of factors behind the defeat, including the argument that Mr. Reagan had failed in his primary objective of elevating public support for the assistance to the point where a majority of Congress had to support it.

"Not enough of us are sure we know what the goal of the Administration is in its policy toward Nicaragua," said Representative Richard A. Gephardt, Democrat of Missouri and chairman of the Democratic Caucus. "There is not a clearly perceptible goal. The goals have not been clearly articulated, so there is no consensus, no cohesion in the Congress or the country."

Expunging Communist Influence

Other Democrats said that they, like Mr. Reagan, wanted to expunge Communist influence from the Western Hemisphere, but doubted this could be accomplished by the Nicaraguan rebels, known as contras.

Mr. Reagan had described today's vote as a historic test of his Presidency. Only by providing aid to the rebels, he said, could the United States "deny the Soviet Union a beachhead in North America." The House rejected his request by a vote of 222 to 210.

Early today Speaker O'Neill estimated that 10 Republicans would vote against the President's request. In fact, there were 16 such Republicans.

Representative Larry J. Hopkins, Republican of Kentucky, said he had voted against the President's request because he became convinced that the Administration's "current policy is not working, is in fact counterproductive, and has no realistic chance to achieve our goal of reversing the Soviet tide in Nicaragua." Mr. Hopkins said his vote

was "a plea for a more effective policy."

Mr. Hopkins's statement paralleled the comments of Representative Lee H. Hamilton, Democrat of Indiana, chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, who said: "This contra war has isolated the United States, not Nicaragua. This proposal will lead us to further escalation, to more bloodshed and to stalemate. There are better alternatives than an expanded war."

Democrats said their victory had also been due, in part, to these factors:

¶ Speaker O'Neill, approaching the end of a 34-year career in Congress,

feels strongly about Nicaragua and engaged in extensive personal lobbying.

¶ Democrats effectively invoked analogies to Vietnam. They said they were troubled by the lack of a coherent policy because it reminded them of the confusion that led the nation into the Vietnam War in the 1960's. Representative Jim Slattery, Democrat of Kansas, said he felt about Nicaragua as his father had felt about Vietnam: "This war just doesn't make sense."

¶ The Democrats repeatedly asserted that United States allies in Latin America opposed Mr. Reagan's request for military aid to the rebels in Nicaragua. Republicans rebutted such

Continued

arguments, but they were handicapped because they had only private expressions of support from Latin America.

¶ Liberal Democrats frequently asked how Mr. Reagan could find \$100 million for Nicaragua at a time when he was trying to cut the budget for many domestic programs, such as job training and various forms of Federal assistance to farmers.

Statement by Buchanan

Both White House officials and Democrats in Congress also agreed that the Administration's campaign suffered from the assertion that the vote represented a choice between sup-

port for the President or support for the Sandinistas, which was first raised by Patrick J. Buchanan, the White House communications director.

While Mr. Buchanan's combative plea for the aid reflected Mr. Reagan's strong position, the White House lost several days of building its case amid a public controversy caused by the statement, some White House officials have acknowledged.

On Capitol Hill, Representative Charles E. Schumer, Democrat of Brooklyn, said the Administration might have won 15 more Democratic votes if it had been "more subtle" in its appeals. "Pat Buchanan is to blame," he said.

White House officials said they believed that despite the setback, they made considerable progress from last year, when only 180 legislators sup-

ported the President in an initial request for aid. On the final vote today, 46 Democrats and 164 Republicans voted to approve the President's request.

Mr. Reagan apparently did win some votes with his promise on Wednesday to hold back most military aid for 90 days while stepping up his efforts to negotiate a settlement in Central America.

Representative Hamilton Fish Jr., a Republican from upstate New York who has opposed military aid in the past, voted with the President today.

But Representative David R. Obey, a Wisconsin Democrat, summed up the argument that proved most effective for his party in opposing the request. "We want to exhaust the diplomatic options first," he said. "The White House has got to get serious about doing that."